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SUBJECT: CONGRESS PARTY LEVERAGES ELECTORAL WIN TO EMPOWER
WOMEN

REF: NEW DELHI 1163

11. (SBU) Summary. Following an impressive win in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government demonstrated the value it places on female constituents by introducing a cachet of women's empowerment initiatives. President Patil's outline of her government's priorities for its first 100 days included ensuring passage of the long-pending Women's Reservation Bill. The bill would set aside one-third of the elected seats in the Lok Sabha and in state legislatures for women. While the bill enjoys support from the Congress Party, the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Left Front, securing its passage during the 15th Lok Sabha will require political finesse. Contacts predict the bill is likely to be passed during the Lok Sabha's winter session, with a watered down reservation of 20 percent of seats for women. If the UPA government succeeds, it will still face challenges in recruiting and retaining effective female politicians.

12. (U) Summary continued. President Patil also pledged to increase the number of seats reserved for women in elected village councils and city municipalities from one-third to one-half, and to re-brand the "National Literacy Mission" as the "National Mission for Female Literacy" which would strive for 100 percent literacy for women over the next five years. The UPA government plans to boost the number of women working for the central government and establish the National Mission on the Empowerment of Women to coordinate the implementation of welfare programs targeting women. End Summary.

Reservation Bill Basics

13. (U) In a June 4 address to both houses of Parliament (Ref. A), India's first female president, Pratibha Patil, outlined her government's priorities, many of which focused on the political and economic empowerment of Indian women. The newly-elected lower house, the Lok Sabha, includes 58 female MPs, finally pushing the number of women members past the 10 percent mark, the highest percentage in India's history. The most dramatic aspect of Patil's speech was the commitment to secure passage of the Women's Reservation Bill within the UPA Government's first 100 days in office. The speech marked the first time a president had ever highlighted women's issues during an opening address to Parliament.

14. (U) The Women's Reservation Bill was first introduced in 1996, but regional parties scuttled it several times, fearing it would crowd out smaller parties and benefit only elite, urban women. The proposed bill would reserve one-third of the elected seats in the Lok Sabha and in state legislatures for women. In its current form, the bill stipulates that the reserved seats rotate randomly between different constituencies in a state or union territory every election -- meaning a seat reserved during one election, would not be reserved during the next election. The reservation system

would enter into force during the next election and end after 15 years. If the bill passes, India would be the only country in the world to reserve such a large percentage of seats in its legislature for women. The bill requires a constitutional amendment and a two-thirds majority in both houses to become law. In the Lok Sabha, this means the UPA government would need 364 votes.

15. (U) The bill enjoys broad support from the major national parties, including the Congress Party, the BJP, and the Left Front. Proponents of the bill, such as Women Power Connect's Ranjana Kumari, asserted that while India's constitution guaranteed equality of the sexes, the reality was much different and required affirmative action to help remedy the situation. Reservations for women for one-third of the seats in panchayats (elected village councils) and municipalities were introduced first in 1993. Kaushiki Sanyal, a Senior Analyst at PRS Legislative Research, conveyed to Poloff that a 2008 study by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj revealed that women on the panchayat became more confident in their decision-making ability and tended to allocate more resources at the village-level toward projects benefiting women and children.

Pitfalls and Political Games

16. (U) Opponents, including some women's rights activists, argue the reservation system would perpetuate the unequal status of women, especially if the public began to believe that women are not competing on merit. Additionally, critics charge that the policy diverts attention from larger issues

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of electoral reform, such as establishing term limits, forcing MPs who are serving in prison to resign, and combating corruption. The rotation system has also come under fire, with critics alleging that if a sitting MP knows his seat will be reserved next election, he has little incentive to work for his constituency as he would be ineligible to seek re-election from that constituency.

17. (U) The bill has met strong opposition from the leaders of regional, caste-based parties in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Sharad Yadav, Janata Dal United (JDU) party president and one of the bill's most outspoken critics, declared he would "consume poison and die" before he would allow the bill to be passed in its current form. Samajwadi Party (SP) leaders Amar Singh and Mulayam Singh Yadav, and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad, have joined JDU's opposition, maintaining that the bill should include "a quota within a quota" for Other Backward Caste (OBC) and Muslim women. PRS' Sanyal explained that the constitution must be amended in order for reservations for OBCs and Muslims to be incorporated into the bill, as political reservation based on caste and religion is not permitted by the constitution. Reservation bill supporters allege that the JDU, SP, and RJD are calling for "a quota within a quota" to delay the passage for fear of losing their seats. The UPA government has announced it will hold consultations with all political parties to address their concerns.

Changing Cultural Norms: The Real Challenge

18. (SBU) Despite this opposition, the UPA government appears confident that it can muster the necessary two-thirds majority for the bill's passage. However, this is only one step toward empowering women in India. Women's rights activists argue that the UPA government must attract and train effective female politicians, not merely fill seats. To do so, it must confront certain pitfalls, including security concerns, cultural norms, and socio-economic factors. Many opponents of the bill predict without broad electoral reforms and comprehensive educational initiatives,

India would encounter a problem common at the panchayat level where reservations already exist: women serving as proxies, propped up by fathers, brothers, and husbands who retain the true decision making powers. Harsimrat Kaur Badal, an MP from Punjab and daughter-in-law of Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, told Poloffs that during her political career, she has met 500 purported women politicians who hold panchayat seats or other positions. Badal opined that only two of these women were legitimate decision makers who engaged with their constituency, independent of male relatives.

¶9. (SBU) Pardeep Kumar, a Youth Congress leader from Haryana, told Poloffs that the reality of putting forth more female candidates was more complex than simply setting aside seats. Most Indian families are reluctant to have their female relatives participate in politics because of the stigma attached to Indian politics, as well as the demanding late night meetings and irregular hours. Kumar noted that the Congress Party lacks the resources to provide transportation to female political workers, especially in rural areas; consequently, they are less likely to participate in party activities. As a student organizer, Kumar had to "beg" parents to allow their daughters to participate in political meetings and rallies. Women from rural communities or lower castes cannot afford drivers or escorts to meetings and will not risk venturing out alone at night.

¶10. (SBU) Kumar also touched upon a deeply-entrenched cultural obstacle to recruiting more female candidates -- many of the women who volunteer for politics are considered "loose women." (Note. The term loose in this context could have many meanings, ranging from a woman who is considered too western to a woman who actually has questionable morals. End note). Although willing to donate their time and energy, these women do not appeal to the electorate because they do not reflect "the ideal Indian moral character." This view has been echoed by JDU's Sharad Yadav, who has been quoted as saying "short haired women (Note - implying women in politics. End note.) are no women at all."

Prediction: Reduced Reservation

¶11. (SBU) Meira Kumar, the first woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha, has expressed confidence in the UPA's ability to pass the bill during her tenure. She told media outlets, "that a woman has been elected as Speaker is an indication that the

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women's bill could be passed in the 15th Lok Sabha." Ranjana Kumari, India's most prominent women's rights lobbyist, predicted the Congress Party would water down the percentage of reserved seats from 33 percent to 20 percent and push the bill through Parliament during the winter session. According to Kumari, "Mulayam (SP) has agreed, Lalu (RJD) will not fight, and Sharad (JDU) will be inconsequential." She told Poloff that lobbyists would not accept the dilution and would continue to fight for a full 33 percent; however, Kumari believes even 20 percent "would be cause for jubilation." She maintained that the Congress Party is fully committed to the bill, and for more than purely altruistic reasons. Kumari commented that after receiving such a strong mandate from voters, Congress "must deliver something" and the Reservation Bill is an easily measurable deliverable.

¶12. (SBU) Renuka Chowdhury, former Minister of Women and Child Development was less optimistic during a conversation with Poloff. She divulged, "there is so much vested interest against the reservation bill...even at the cabinet level." Chowdhury alleged that Kapil Sibal, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, has opposed women's empowerment initiatives in the past government (Note. According to the media, he has recently stated female literacy will be a priority for the UPA government. End note.) Despite the governments stronger mandate, Chowdhury believes the

"Congress won't be able to push it through" in the end.

Patil's Other Pledges

¶13. (U) As part of its 100-day action plan, the UPA government has also pledged to introduce a bill which will set aside half the seats in elected village councils (panchayats) and city municipalities for women. Presently, only a third of the seats in village councils are reserved for women. Additionally, President Patil committed to reaching 100 percent literacy for women (the current literacy rate is approximately 54 percent) in the next five years through the National Literacy Mission, which the GOI will recast as the National Mission for Female Literacy. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, under which the scheme falls, has yet to flesh out an implementation plan. Critics have pointed out that the funding for the literacy mission has not been increased since the government revitalized it in 1999. President Patil also promised to increase the number of women working in central government jobs and to establish the National Mission on the Empowerment of Women to coordinate the implementation of welfare programs for women.

Comment: The Long Haul

¶14. (SBU) India has an impressive record of strong female politicians. In fact, women currently lead the Congress Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, the Trinamool Congress Party, and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhaghham Party. The years Indira Gandhi served as India's prime minister are well-known. While it is heartening that the UPA government is leveraging its mandate to push through women's empowerment initiatives, its ability to fulfill the ambitious commitments outlined in Patil's speech remains in doubt. The Reservation Bill faces formidable opposition, evidenced by the fact that the bill has lingered longer than any other piece of legislation in the Parliament's history. If the UPA succeeds, it must supplement the quota with a plan to recruit qualified women that tackles practical concerns such as safety and financial security. However, changing the general cultural and social mindset regarding the role of Indian women will be a much longer process. End Comment.
BURLEIGH